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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007496

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT WORKING TO PREVENT FARC TERRORISTS FROM
FILLING POST-PARA 'VACUUM'

REF: BOGOTA 6262

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) GOC and independent analysts say the State, and not the FARC, is occupying most of the territory vacated by demobilized paramilitaries. Still, the FARC has gained ground in some key narcotrafficking corridors, mainly in Norte de Santander, Choco/Valle, and Narino. The paras' withdrawal has, however, facilitated the emergence of a new wave of narcotrafficking rings, most of which are still small, localized, and more of a criminal problem than a national security threat. Only a tiny portion of those groups' members are reinserted ex-paras. End Summary.

Assessing State Control

2. (C) Demobilization of over 30,000 paramilitaries during 2003-6 raised concerns about the State's ability to occupy the former paramilitary areas. Often referred to as the post-paramilitary 'vacuum,' these strategic spaces include territories, corridors, and populations. To assess the State's success in exerting control over these spaces, we spoke with a range of sources: COLMIL joint tactical intelligence (CIC), COLAR central intelligence (CIME), and police intelligence (DIPOL); security analyst Alfredo Rangel and conflict think tank CERAC; the OAS; and Marta Luiz, leading Semana magazine journalist on paramilitary issues. For a more detailed view of key regions in the southwest, we also visited G-2 and army intelligence units of the COLAR's 3rd Division in Cali.

FARC/ELN: Limited Gains

3. (C) Despite speculation that paramilitary withdrawal would allow the FARC to occupy territories, our sources agreed FARC advances have been limited to a few key areas -- in the Catatumbo region (Norte de Santander) along the Venezuelan border; in the Nudo de Paramillo area and Uraba region (southern Cordoba); along river and mountain routes in south Choco/north Valle del Cauca; and in Narino -- all strategic corridors for narcotrafficking. Elsewhere the COLMIL has repulsed the FARC and/or criminal competitors have outgunned the terrorists. The FARC's ability to generate civilian support is also minimal outside of coca cultivation zones. The OAS analyst said the paras' largely urban presence did not lend itself to being taken over by the FARC, with its rural roots and weak city networks. As for the ELN, Narino is the only area where the group appears to have gained from paramilitary demobilization.

New Narco Mafias: Small-Scale for Now

14. (C) CERAC told us paramilitary dominance once restrained violence by other actors; demobilization has spawned a new wave of mini-mafias. Some sources count up to 22 such groups, but GOC agencies agree on only 18, with about 2000 members in all. A handful of these criminal groups count hundreds of members, but most number only a few dozen persons. These new groups are profit driven -- primarily focused on narcotrafficking but also engaging in fuel theft, kidnapping, and extortion. In some locales, they avoid confrontations with the FARC and strike cooperative accords, but where they think they can dominate the FARC, turf wars occur. These groups are strongest in the departments of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Narino; they are also active in Arauca, Norte Santander, Casanare, and Cordoba. They are most prevalent in coca cultivation zones and along trafficking routes.

15. (C) These new groups are independent and localized, without any unified national structure or central command. As such, analysts see them for now as more of a criminal

problem than a strategic security threat. There is potential for consolidation into larger cartels, but sources felt most of the groups were only in the early stages of development. The handful of larger groups, which are of greater concern, are "Los Machos" (500 members) and "Los Rastrojos" (250) in Valle, "Organizacion Nueva Generacion" (400) in Narino, "Hombres de Negro" (350) in Arauca, and "Aguilas Negras" (300) in Catatumbo. Some of these, like Los Machos and Los Rastrojos, predate demobilization.

16. (C) Many gang members are former AUC who chose not to demobilize because of prior crimes for which they would have to serve jail time. Many gang leaders are ex-AUC mid-level commanders who fall in this category. A smaller component is believed to be 'recycled' AUC, i.e. those who demobilized but returned to delinquency before completing the reinsertion process. Although the latter share is estimated to be as high as 30%, among 2000 gang members that amounts to 600 persons of the over 30,000 demobilized. The gangs are trying to recruit ex-AUC from the reinsertion process, luring them with generous remuneration to exploit their area knowledge and operational know-how. Reinsertion monthly stipends (USD 160) end after 18 months. If the former paramilitaries have not found gainful employment at that time, delinquency rates could rise.

Expansion of State Authority

17. (C) The security forces and other government authorities occupy most of the areas of former paramilitary influence, especially in urban and populated areas. The COLMIL/police has greater coverage today than when demobilization began in 2003, due to heavy investment in the armed forces and the extension of a police presence to all municipalities. Coverage is not total, however, and the new criminal groups exploit gaps. The gangs are mostly small, isolated, and decentralized -- requiring greater intelligence collection to guide operations. The police have established 48 substations in zones of former paramilitary influence to prevent the demobilized from forming criminal groups. The police recently organized specialized units of 150 officers to target and eliminate emergent narco-criminal gangs.

North Valle: FARC Deterred

18. (C) A major battleground for post-para influence among terrorists, narco-criminals, and the COLMIL is the Canon de Garrapatas in the north of Valle de Cauca Department. The Canon pass connects the coca-rich valley between the Andean ranges to the rivers Atrato and San Juan, which provide transport to the Pacific, Panama, and the Caribbean. As such, it is an important narcotrafficking corridor. Following the demobilization of 556 members of the AUC's Bloque Calima in December 2004, the FARC created the Hector Maldonado Mobile Column to infiltrate the Canon. To counter the FARC, COLAR and COLNAV jointly formed Task Force Darien, a river-based 400-man counterinsurgent unit. The FARC was also outnumbered by cartel leaders Don Diego's 500 Machos and

the Varela's 250-strong Rastrojos, composed of ex-paramilitaries. Clashes occurred between the FARC and TF Darien as well as between the FARC and the competing narco-trafficking gangs, forcing the FARC to abandon the effort and dismantle the new column.

Narino: Contested

9. (C) Narino department, in the far southwest corner of Colombia, contains vital coca trafficking routes, with outlets to the Pacific and access to the porous Ecuadorian border. The GOC has never been strong in the region, and the AUC's Libertadores del Sur (677 members) did not have a sure hold. After the bloc's disarmament in July 2005, conflict activity has increased, as new narco-criminal gang "Organizacion Nueva Generacion" (ONG; 400 men) has entered FARC and ELN territories. While the FARC and ELN#zISQQ\j&&]Q(j6ations have also been stepped upm by CD brigade and special forces units. Still, this is the only region of Colombia where all illegal groups are growing in numbers of combatants.

Choco: Uncertainty

10. (C) The Uraba region of northern Choco department offers access corridors to the border with Panama and trafficking in every form of contraband, particularly exports of coca and imports of weapons. The independent (non-AUC) Bloque Elmer Cardenas demobilized 800 members in August 2006, creating a large potential vacuum which all parties are lining up to fill. The COLAR has deployed a newly created mobile brigade (16th BRIM) of 300 soldiers and a task force of about 400 to deter reentry of the FARC 57th front.

Norte de Santander: FARC Strongest

11. (C) The Catatumbo region in Norte de Santander department is a strategic area bordering Venezuela, creating lucrative opportunities for trafficking of fuel and coca. Illicit activities are so widespread that the AUC's former Catatumbo Bloc funded a significant portion of paramilitary operations nationwide. The Catatumbo Bloc fought the FARC's 33rd Front for over five years, eventually gaining almost complete control over the region. With the demobilization of the bloc's nearly 1,500 members in late 2004, the FARC has reestablished a dominant presence. Rangel asserted that, of the former paramilitary areas, Catatumbo is the one where the FARC is strongest. Peace Commissioner Restrepo told us the FARC intimidated the population by murdering local leaders, collecting taxes, setting up roadblocks on secondary roads, and asserting control over legal/illegal trade. Restrepo said there is little public support for the security forces due to fear of FARC reprisals. The COLAR's 30th Brigade is deployed to the area, but it is overstretched. CIC analysts said an additional problem is the Venezuela border, in particular the Venezuela Guardia Nacional, which they asserted is complicit with the FARC.

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has added a new 29th brigade to focus on Narino, recognizing the low military penetration and the growing criminality in the region. Short-term operations have also been stepped up by CD brigade and special forces units. Still, this is the only region of Colombia where all illegal groups are growing in numbers of combatants.

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